National Volunteer Fire Council

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TESTIMONY BEFORE THE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
ON
S. 1941, THE FIREFIGHTER INVESTMENT AND RESPONSE ENHANCEMENT ACT
JULY 25, 2000
BY
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Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, my name is James Monihan. I am the Former Chairman of the National Volunteer Fire Council (NVFC) and currently serve as their Delaware State Director. I am also a firefighter in the Lewes Fire Department in Lewes, Delaware. I have served as a volunteer firefighter for 43 years and still respond regularly to calls. I have had experience in all phases of the life of a first responder, including chemical and hazardous materials incidents, EMS, rescue and fire. On behalf of the volunteer fire service, I appreciate the opportunity to comment on the needs of America's volunteer fire service addressed in S. 1941, the Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement (FIRE) Act. *The National Volunteer Fire Council strongly supports passage of this piece of legislation,* which currently has 32 bipartisan cosponsors in the Senate and 276 in the House. America's fire and emergency services are in need of your assistance and you, as Members of Congress, can make a difference with the necessary funding.

The NVFC represents the interests of the nation's more than 800,000 volunteer firefighters, who staff America's 28,000 volunteer fire departments located in every state of the Union. According to the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA), nearly 75% of all firefighters are volunteer. More than half of the approximately one hundred firefighters that are killed each year in the line of duty are volunteers. In addition to the obvious contribution that volunteer firefighters lend to their communities, these brave men and women represent a significant cost saving to taxpayers. A 1991 study commissioned by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) concluded that it would cost taxpayers $36.8 billion each year to convert volunteer fire departments to career departments. According to a September 1999 study by the State Auditor of my home state of Delaware, the volunteer fire service in Delaware saves taxpayers more than $116 million per year.

One of the largest problems faced by America's volunteer fire service is funding. Most volunteer departments serve small, rural communities and are quite often the only line of defense in those communities. Unfortunately, these departments are struggling to provide their members with adequate protective clothing, safety devices and training to protect their communities.

At the same time, the federal government is asking the fire service to respond to calls involving terrorism, hazardous materials, natural and man-made disasters and wildland/urban interface fires. Many of these emergencies occur on federal properties such as national parks and lands. Wild fires that are kept small are less expensive to extinguish and cause much less damage. Your investment in the services of these rural fire departments ultimately protects federal and private lands from fire losses and human tragedies. In this instance, your support can be viewed as payment for services rendered the same as a homeowner who gives a contribution or buys a ticket to a fundraiser for their volunteer fire department.

In addition, when federal dollars are used to build new interstate highways, they often run through small communities protected by a volunteer fire department. These small town fire companies must respond to huge influx of auto accidents, some involving hazardous materials. They are already struggling to handle their own needs and finances, and are now forced to provide more services, and receive no compensation for their responses.

Many rural departments operate on budgets of less than $10,000 per year. On that small budget, it is very difficult for these departments to pay for insurance premiums, fuel, and upkeep of equipment, much less buy new equipment. These departments are using fire trucks from the 1950s and 60s and self-contained breathing apparatus that should have be taken out of service a long time ago according to NFPA standards. In some counties, it can take up 40 minutes for an ambulance to arrive and as long as an hour and 10 minutes for a rescue tool, commonly called "the Jaws of Life," to get to the scene of a car accident. Some departments have only one or two radios and no alerting system. When there is an emergency call for them, the county Sheriff's Department notifies them by telephone. If they are not near their phone, they've missed the call.

On April 6, 1999, two volunteer firefighters died while trying to escape a wildland fire burning outside of Morehead, Kentucky. Subsequently, two Safety and Occupational Health Specialists from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), Division of Safety Research, investigated the incident. They concluded that, to minimize similar occurrences, fire departments engaged in wildland firefighting should provide firefighters with wildland personal protective equipment (PPE) that is compliant with NFPA standards, they should equip firefighters with approved fire shelters and provide training on the proper use of the fire shelters, and they should learn, communicate, and follow the 10 standard fire orders as developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG). The NVFC is confident that an increase in federal funding is the only way a small volunteer department such as this one could purchase the equipment and provide the training needed to comply with NIOSH's recommendations.

There are departments like this in every congressional district across this country. It is ironic that all of the federal agencies and even Congress can adopt mandates on the fire service. However, these departments are the only line of defense in these communities and if they can't meet these mandates, what happens?

The funding problems in America's volunteer fire service are not just limited to rural areas. As suburbs continue to grow, so does the burden on the local fire and EMS department. Even though many of these departments have the essentials, they are unable to gain access to new technologies. At no other time have advances been greater in equipment to protect them and make their jobs safer. Yet because the newer technology is so expensive, many volunteer fire departments are forced to use outdated equipment.

For instance, many firefighters can now wear an encapsulated ensemble of fireproof gear, along with lined helmets that absorb shock, and hoods that protect exposed head and neck parts. There's also a Personal Assisted Safety Signal, or PASS, device that is attached to the firefighter. The PASS will emit a loud signal if the firefighter gets trapped or becomes disabled. Older versions required firefighters to sound the device themselves. Newer models sound a 110-decible alarm if a firefighter remains motionless for 25 seconds. Each PASS device sells for $125.

Instead of the traditional gear that weighs between 40 and 60 pounds, lighter weight air bottles and materials have lightened firefighters' loads, decreasing their physical stress. However, turnout gear costs more than $1,000 per set and self-contained breathing apparatus are close to $3,000 each.

Perhaps the best advance in fire equipment in the past 25 years - and the most expensive - is the thermal imaging camera. The cameras, which can cost up to $25,000, are used to distinguish items of various temperatures in a smoke-filled room. Firefighters can make out a human body through thick smoke or can hone in on fire "hot spots" without having to tear entire structures apart. Older models were mounted on helmets; newer versions are hand held, adding flexibility to searches.

Other advances include Global Positioning Systems, which allow dispatchers to send out fire companies nearest to a fire; fiber-optic ropes, which contain tiny lights to help firefighters retrace their way out of smoke-filled structures; and compressed air foam, a fire retardant that increases the surface area of water, helping to extinguish fires three to five times more quickly.

Unfortunately, many volunteer fire departments are unable to take advantage of this new technology because of budget restraints. Do you know how many pancake breakfasts it takes to buy a $25,000 piece of equipment? Many departments can tell you, because that's how they pay for it. These constant fundraising demands are intertwined into every aspect of volunteer fire and emergency services, affecting the recruitment of new members, the retention of existing members, and the ability to train members.

This legislation will allow departments to more adequately equip and train their firefighters, thereby increasing the safety level of the communities they protect. In addition, Federal funding of local fire companies represents a form of local taxpayer relief. Also, as departments become better equipped, their Insurance Services Office (ISO) rating goes down, in turn lowering the insurance rates of the community's homeowners. The volunteer fire service represents a national resource of enormous value that must be supported and nurtured if it is to continue to fulfill its critical role in emergency services response. This committee and Congress can do its part by

supporting the Firefighter Investment and Response Enhancement (FIRE) Act.

When I began my testimony today, I stated that the volunteer fire service is in need of your assistance and that you, as Members of Congress, could make a difference with the necessary funding. I hope that I have painted a picture that illustrates that the need is real, that the moneys do go a long way, and that the support of the fire service by Congress is indeed a national concern.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your time and your attention to the views of America's fire service, and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.